President’s address to State Council

Western Teacher volume 53.4 June 2024

This is a transcript of the speech given by SSTUWA President Matt Jarman to June State Council Conference 2024. Live remarks may slightly alter to written text.

Before I begin my address, I would like us to take a stroll back down memory lane – all the way back to 23 April.

The 23rd April 2024 was an extraordinary day. In total some 12,000 members marched not only across the Matagarup Bridge but across Western Australia – in places as far apart as Christmas Island and Esperance.

It was an amazing experience and I would like to thank everyone who made it possible and everyone who joined in.

It was also enormously successful – 20 separate improvements in the third offer, compared to the second – were delivered as a consequence of our action:

- A small, but financially important increase in the salary component.
- A new classification for senior teachers.
- Important concessions on the management of class sizes.
- Three improvements to the way professional learning is managed.
- Access to pro rata long service leave after seven years.
- Internal relief payments for principals and deputy principals.
- Improved classroom support for small group tuition.
- Additional FTEs for complex behaviour management.
- The establishment of a workload taskforce reporting direct to the Minister.
- Access to part-time arrangements for principals.
- An extension of the air conditioning subsidy.
- Additional vacation travel concessions in the Pilbara, Kimberley and Goldfields.
- The right of return for principals appointed to system level positions.
- Improvements for staff at Canning College and SIDE and for advanced skills school psychologists.

[These] all came as a direct result of those actions by members sacrificing half a day’s pay and making their voices heard.

All of these are important improvements and I think we need to put the 2023 General Agreement negotiations process in context.

Public education has been treated appallingly by successive governments at both federal and state level and by both major parties.

Colin Barnett started the rot when he cut hundreds of millions of dollars from public education. You can trace the current teacher shortage back to the appalling decision by Barnett and by Peter Collier, who still runs the Liberal Party, by the way, to cut 500 education positions and freeze teacher numbers, all the way back in 2013.

When Labor came to power we had high hopes – but remember that very first Christmas gift in 2017 - $64 million in cuts on the back of Labor refusing to roll back the Liberal state government’s damaging IPS (Independent Public Schools) program, despite a damaging Parliamentary Inquiry in 2015 into IPS which the current treasurer was the deputy chair.

Then almost immediately came the $1,000 salary caps and further capped rises as inflation soared, with the public sector workforce being used to solve budget deficits with no thought for the consequences for the people involved.

Through the eyes of many of our members, the education sector became a babysitting service during COVID-19, the economy was the primary concern. School leaders and teachers were suddenly running.

Federally meanwhile, the Gonski funding reforms were sabotaged and we moved into an upside down world where private schools get funded by more than they need while public schools are starved of millions of dollars in funds.

This process was undertaken by a coalition federal government but frankly the dragged-out approach from the current Labor government has been just as hard to take because to be honest we expected so much more than rhetoric not matched by actual action.

And let's be clear – things could have been far, far worse. The efforts of people like Anne Gisborne and Pat Byrne to fight heroic rearguard actions prevented far worse damage being done to the public system.

We gave the caps the boot, ensured TAFE in WA was spared the devastation inflicted in the east and fought in the corner of teachers throughout the pandemic, despite enormous public and private pressure.

We must never forget the struggles that set the backdrop to the people in this room helping just a year ago to shape the wishes of our members across WA into a cohesive and comprehensive Log of Claims – 98 items in all.

Some of them were, frankly, ambitious. Many of the claims challenged what seemed to be a system impervious to change, one formed during the tumultuous times to which I have just referred, not in weeks or months, but across years of neglect and, in some cases, active vandalism of the public education system.

It entrenched a system that had created massive workload, that had hugely restricted educators' ability to transfer their skills to a new location; a system which seemed designed to actively discourage people moving into leadership roles and which completely ignored the reality faced in classrooms presented by trying to deal with the explosion in students with complex needs, often resulting not only in classes which exceeded the maximum numbers, but which contained many pupils who needed extra help – an impossible situation for teachers to deal with.

That same system had allowed the demand for documented plans to run riot – far exceeding what they were originally designed to address.

It had led to a proliferation of private for-profit professional learning providers who expected teachers to not only use their systems, and theirs alone, but to then provide detailed reports of no relevance or help to teachers, as well as effectively closing off opportunities for teachers who had not used such methods to get employment at those workplaces.

Above all it had driven thousands of people out of the public education system.

The SSTUWA called out IPS when it launched, we called it out again recently and now we have an offer before us that challenges its foundations for the first time in more than a decade.

There are conditions in this agreement in principle that will accelerate making the structural changes to IPS the public system needs.

I know that many in this room, and many of those who were here before us, had all but given up hope of changing that system, despite all the work they had done.

It looked like the door to change had been locked and the key thrown away.

Well, we haven't broken the door down yet, but we have it hanging off the hinges.

The prospective changes to staff placement to allow teachers and prospective leaders to be working in regional schools whilst retaining their substantive positions for three years are hugely significant, not only for the individuals who will benefit immediately if the agreement is accepted, but for the precedent it sets.

A further response to claim 95 in the Log, on Staff Placement, commits the department to "further discuss merit selection and impact of perceptions and assumptions about the skill sets of applicants from regional areas through EREC."
Now that is a short paragraph but I know many of you in this room will recognise its significance.

It is the first real acceptance of those in power that the IPS system left regional teachers feeling undervalued and indeed insulted.

I believe that this is the first step to redressing the damage done by IPS and moving the sector back to full and fair employment opportunities for all – whether they wish to work in regional areas or try working in the metropolitan area.

The door also seemed shut to serious reform on class sizes. In the past the employer had relied on citing wild cost estimates around reducing class sizes and then doing absolutely nothing to address the issue.

Once again, this Agreement in Principle opens the door to full and proper reform.

Yes, it is only a beginning, but making the provision of additional support for teachers asked to teach oversize classes mandatory, rather than optional, is absolutely crucial.
So too is taking into account both the number of students with complex needs and the proportion of the class on individual plans when assessing those support needs.

Now, we all know that pushing the responsibility for complying with such edicts onto principals is often neither fair, nor effective.

This is why the SSTUWA is delighted with the inclusion in the third offer of the Workforce Ministerial Taskforce.

This group will report direct to the Minister, not to the department. It will have a specific focus on classroom support, complex behaviour management professional learning compliance and individual student documented plans as well as support in managing school leader and teacher workloads.

It might be easy to shrug and say it will be another talkfest but I am absolutely confident that this taskforce will be crucial in bringing about even more serious reductions in workload.

This taskforce also offers a clear way to monitor the new measures that will come in if the agreement is accepted.

We will be able to take evidence from teachers and from school leaders on whether they are getting the extra support they need and indeed if it is even possible for schools to offer that support within current resources.

I can also assure you that while these measures are an improvement on what we have now, the SSTUWA will not be giving up the fight for further action on class sizes.

There will be a very visible public campaign on this issue as we head into the state election due in March next year – and we know there is significant voter support for decisive action.

Class sizes is a community issue, not just a workplace issue for teachers.

We have attracted significant publicity on the issue by including it in our Log of Claims and, as I have said, the current AIP offers some important first steps on addressing the issue.

We know, thanks to member feedback in our February 2024 survey, what the impact is on school operations of oversized classes.

You will be asked today to help us shape a campaign aimed at delivering further action on class sizes as we head towards the 2025 state election.

Given there are some issues where we will be working to bring about further reforms, I think I should mention what I believe may well be legacy-creating elements in this offer.

These include:

- Amendments to the way paid time off for union reps and delegates is allocated.
- Long service leave after seven years.
- The new Senior Teacher Level 2 position.
- The move to district, rather than local, allowances along with air conditioning subsidy extensions and extra travel allowances in specific areas.
- Staff placement and school leader position wins.
- The workload ministerial taskforce.

I believe this agreement in principle could see a graduate teacher start their career on one of the highest starter salaries in Australia, plus an improved allowance.
They will have the opportunity if they wish to head to the country and may well end up with a vastly improved allowance.

Those who stay in the metro area for the first few years can then choose a regional option, with the safety net of a return to their substantive position being open to them for three years.

If you are in the system already you might take advantage of the new senior teacher levels, or opt for three years to take up the new Level 3 Classroom Teacher classification at a school in need, or even try a principal role in a regional school with the same security of your substantive position being available for three years.

Sometimes it is easy to see what you don't get in an agreement – you can focus on what is not addressed rather than what is.

That is completely understandable, but I believe this offer offers substantial real-life improvements across a range of levels, as well paving the way for more improvements down the track.

And yes, I absolutely guarantee you that this union, your union, will continue to work on issues like GROH (Government Regional Officer Housing), the free movement of the workforce around the state in both directions and class sizes.

If I could stand here and tell you that we could undo the damage done in the past decade or so in one general agreement I would be absolutely delighted.
But I can't. No one could. This agreement is an important stone laid by our hands on the path to where we want to be.

We are making some significant steps in this current AIP but there is no denying there is much, much more to do to build on the work of our predecessors, without whom we might well have had no public system left to defend.

Let me move for a moment to the national stage. At the end of January, the Federal Minister for Education Jason Clare announced an agreement with WA that would see the state's public schools, in his words, "fully funded".

Now, this is another case of the door now being ajar, but far from fully open, just as WA schools will be far from fully funded.

The announcement from Minister Clare said the Commonwealth would give WA an extra $777.4 million over five years, boosting its share of public school funding from the long-standing 20 per cent to 22.5 per cent.

The agreement with WA also requires the state to lift its own spending on public schools by at least an equivalent amount.

So, let's do some maths. Currently WA chips in 75 per cent and the federal government 20 per cent – getting us to 95 per cent.

The new arrangement would see WA's contribution rise to 77.5 per cent and the federal government's to 22.5 per cent. So that's 100 per cent right? Why would we not welcome that?

Well, any increase in funding is welcome. But back in the day, before the Turnbull Government's attack on public school funding, there was an additional four per cent in funding from the state government on top of that 75 per cent, which paid for services like SCSA (School Curriculum and Standards Authority), depreciation, school buses and the like.

With the Turnbull changes, the state was able to roll that into its 75 per cent contribution and thus the additional four per cent in funding vanished, but not the extra costs.
Public schools were now paying for SCSA and the like from their contributions. They've never come from the private school allocations.

Until that four per cent is restored as additional to the 75 per cent, WA schools will still fall short – being funded to 96 per cent of their needs, not 100 per cent.

And of course, private schools in WA will still be funded at a higher rate than they need.

It remains one of the strangest school funding arrangements anywhere in the world.

We should acknowledge that WA has led the way in securing more funding from the federal government – we just want the full amount.

The AEU, under the leadership of Correna Haythorpe, has been relentless in pursuing the funding issue at a national level.

I am proud that the SSTUWA has played a part in these national campaigns, including For Every Child.

There were encouraging words from Minister Clare and Prime Minister Anthony Albanese at an event to mark Public Education Day last month.

We welcome the words. We would welcome genuine full funding, across every state, even more.

I want to turn to our staff. This has, as you all know, been one of the busiest times
the union has experienced – and I include the pandemic period in that.

The Schools General Agreement and associated events might have dominated, but there has been plenty more going on.

The TAFE Committee has been doing extensive and much appreciated work in negotiations on that sector's General Agreement.

Stage one industrial bans commenced on Monday (10 June) whilst those talks continue. You will hear more of that in the TAFE report.

A refresh of the union's presence has been developed, with a focus on the Indigenous history of Western Australia and strong representation of the union's role in connecting all aspects of public education.

We have seen a significant growth in membership, to a point where we sit at around 20,000 members at a time when in the wider world, union membership
has declined.

In part this is generated by the general agreement processes, but it is driven by the excellent work of the union's Growth Team.

That in turn leads to more and more work for our Membership Team who process all those applications and for those who support those members.

The efforts of our industrial organisers, the Member Assist Team and those who back them is much appreciated.

In a post-COVID-19 and sometimes post-truth world, where social media can drive misconceptions and misinformation, it has never been more important to have dedicated people who go into workplaces and work cooperatively to address misrepresentations if required, solve problems and ensure people's rights at work are applied and respected.

Where necessary those issues can lead to legal situations and our Legal Team has been doing vital work on behalf of those members who need it.

Other members have been subjected to violent incidents and harassment as the problems we see in other areas of the community invariably find their way
into schools.

Community concern about this issue has grown, which is a good thing as it encourages everyone to find solutions.

The union has been very active in this area, urging members to report all incidents and monitoring statistics from organisations such as WorkCover to track levels of workers' compensation claims in public education, many of which are violence or stress related.
Indeed, the union will be putting out a survey in the coming weeks to assess the levels and impact of gender-basedviolence in public education workplaces.

Schools cannot fix the violence issues we are facing. Only the community working together can address violence be it in domestic, social or school settings.

Research is crucial both within our own membership and with the broader community. National and state level surveys into workforce issues in education have been conducted by the AEU and ourselves.

These surveys give us the insights we need to target resources where they are most needed.

The SSTUWA has also commissioned community research to assess public and voter sentiment on key issues in public education.

This is vital in enabling us to convince decision-makers of the areas where they need to instigate change.

One of the other crucial areas we have been working on is the application of the findings of *Facing the Facts*, the report generated by the review into public education, led by Dr Carmen Lawrence.

It is astounding to think that *Facing the Facts* was formally launched just seven months ago.

One of my abiding memories was of members standing up and speaking at November State Council just a few days later, some in tears, because for the first time in all their years of teaching they felt heard.

We were also cautioned that getting the review done was all well and good but we shouldn't expect much reaction.

Of course, *Facing the Facts* had already prompted huge community debate and some action. The Minister had accepted the report personally at the launch. He had already instigated his own red tape taskforce, one which when its report was

eventually released reinforced virtually every finding of *Facing the Facts*.

I'd like to remind you of what I said in November: "I suspect the reality is that the thoroughness of the review process and the positive, solution oriented *Facing the Facts* report has left very little room for it to be dismissed or swept from sight."

"We will work to make sure the review's recommendations are acted on. We will seek to ensure that we return democracy into how the public education system works as a connected system.

"We will work to stop the privatisation by stealth of the public education system. We will work to end the situations where a teacher cannot get a role because they didn't use a particular private provider's product.

"We will work to return to a fair and transparent recruitment system where it is quality of teaching that matters, not who you know.

"We will work to return to a system that provides full and proper respect, support and statewide services to school leaders, teachers and yes, students where and when it is needed."

As we discussed the general agreement process, I mentioned the 20 improvements that came in offer three, compared to offer two. Improvements prompted by your actions on 23 April.

I can also tell you that 19 of the recommendations of *Facing the Facts* stand to be implemented via the Agreement in Principle, should it be accepted.

Nineteen recommendations implemented within seven months.

If anyone had told me in November when I stood in this room and handed a copy to the Minister that we would achieve such an outcome by now, I would have admired their amazing optimism but perhaps quietly doubted their judgment.

What I described last year as tempered optimism has been more than met.
And we are not satisfied with that. By the way, Lindsay Hale will continue to ensure that *Facing the Facts* is front and centre in government decision making on issues that affect public education.

There have been many elements leading us to where we now stand.

We have come from $1,000 salary caps through wage rises that though an improvement, were swamped by rampant inflation and rising interest rates.

We have, in tandem with the Public Sector Alliance, given salary caps the boot.
We have had proper bargaining restored.

We have instigated the most comprehensive review of public education in the history of WA and started to see its recommendations acted upon.

We have dramatically raised community awareness of public education issues.
We have campaigned relentlessly on funding and seen significant improvements, though not full funding yet.

We have negotiated an offer which we believe delivers immediate benefits in many areas and kickstarts the process of genuine system reform in others.

These achievements are the result of your hard work and that of those who have gone before you. On Executive, at State Council, at District Councils, in workplaces as reps, in the classrooms and lecture theatres of your workplaces.

They represent years of work. Of integrated strategies, long-term planning, constructive research, reviews and yes of industrial action, too.

There is still much to do. There are still plenty of improvements to be made. There is still much respectful debate to be had. Many issues that need further work.

I can assure you we are ready for those debates, for difficult conversations. We will engage with facts and challenge those who make claims without evidence or substance, or indeed try to piggyback on the work of others or sit outside our movement and snipe while doing nothing themselves to bring about change.

This has been a long road and there is a considerable part of the journey to go.
Thank you for support and hard work as we undertake it.



By Matt Jarman
President

Authorised by Sally Dennis, General Secretary, The State School Teachers' Union of W.A.
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